

# Handling Food During A Power Outage

## Know What To Do Before The Power Goes Out

As you are aware, California is experiencing an unusual storm event, resulting in random power outages. Environmental Health Services recognizes the impact these conditions may have on retail food operations. This bulletin is provided to assist retail food facility operators in preparing for or experiencing a power outage.

Appropriate decision-making is critical. Immediate measures must be taken to determine what food is safe to keep and what food must be discarded. Many factors must be considered to make the proper decision on whether or not to operate a food facility during a power outage. Factors that should be considered include:

- Potential liability regarding foodborne illness associated with the mishandling of food during abnormal conditions
- Minimizing product loss due to continued use of inoperable refrigeration units
- Potential liability associated with consumer and employee exposure to unsafe, dark or low light conditions
- Loss of customer confidence due to compromised service and food quality

## Food Temperatures

Food held in refrigerators or freezers may become unsafe when the power goes out if the temperature of the food becomes too warm. The danger zone for potentially hazardous food is temperatures above 41°F but below 140°F. If potentially hazardous food enters this temperature zone and remains there for four hours or more, the food may become unsafe to eat. If the power outage is of a shorter duration or if the food is kept cold, then the food can be held safely in the refrigerator. The following tips are offered to obtain the best protection for the food:

- Keep the refrigerator doors closed to maintain the cold temperature within the unit while power is off.
- Extend the storage life of potentially hazardous foods by placing the food in clean, uncontaminated ice and/or dry ice in the refrigerator. Minimize the opening of the refrigerator doors in order to retain the cold temperature inside.

- Transport the potentially hazardous food to an approved cold storage facility that has not been affected by the power outage and is fully operational. A refrigeration truck or ice storage may be another alternative.

**REMEMBER:** *You cannot rely on appearance or odor to tell if a food will make someone sick.*

## Recommendations for safeguarding potentially hazardous foods:

- When in doubt, throw it out.
- Discard all potentially hazardous foods that have been in the danger zone (between 41°F-140°F) for four hours or more.
- Check foods with a probe thermometer to make sure that the proper temperature has been maintained. Remember to sanitize the thermometer with an alcohol swab or chlorine solution before and after each use.
- Do not refreeze thawed food. Treat it like other refrigerated potentially hazardous food.

## Power Outage Precautions

Every attempt will be made by Environmental Health Services to assist and provide guidance to food facilities during power outages. If the following conditions are observed by the Environmental Health Specialist, the facility may be directed to discontinue operation until such time as the conditions have been rectified:

- No hot water due to lack of power to the electric water heater.
- Inability to properly wash and sanitize multi-use consumer utensils.
- Unsafe food temperatures due to the lack of power to hot and cold food-holding equipment such as:
  - refrigeration units
  - freezer units
  - steam tables
  - hot-holding units
- Lack of a hood ventilation system and make-up air to vent gas equipment.
- Lack of lighting in the food preparation area.

In the event that an extended power outage occurs, good business practice dictates that a food facility serving potentially hazardous food voluntarily close for safety and liability issues.

## Re-Opening Guidelines

Retail food facilities that have voluntarily closed, should verify that the following conditions are in effect prior to resuming food preparation or sale of prepackaged foods:

- Hot (minimum 120°F) potable water and cold potable water are available under pressure.
- Verify that all power breakers have been properly reset, especially at the hot water heater and automatic gas supply solenoid.
- Handwashing facilities are fully operable.
- Toilet facilities are fully operable.
- Electricity and natural gas (if applicable) services are available.
- Refrigeration and freezer units are fully operable and capable of maintaining food temperatures at 41°F or below in refrigeration units and food is solidly frozen in freezers.
- Hot holding food units are capable of maintaining food temperatures at 140°F or above.
- Adequate and approved ventilation for gas equipment are operable.
- Proper cleaning and sanitizing of multi-use utensils are available.
- Adequate and approved lighting is available.
- All food can be protected from contamination.
- All potentially hazardous food that is or has been out of temperature for 4 or more hours is discarded promptly and properly.
- Food that has thawed in freezer units due to an extended power outage is not refrozen.

### Note:

- If the food facility is closed by an Environmental Health Specialist, the facility must remain closed until Environmental Health Services approves the facility to reopen.
- All food facilities must be in compliance with the California Health and Safety Code prior to reopening.

Thank you for your continued support and efforts in protecting public health and safety.  
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